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SUBJECT: COCKTAILS FOR THE ROMA - MOLOTOV STYLE

REF: Budapest 493 and previous

¶1. Summary: Recent Molotov cocktail attacks on Roma houses in the village of Patka highlight a growing trend of open confrontation between Roma and non-Roma Hungarian citizens in various locales. Village officials and the local "Civil Guard" group face racism claims in their effort to maintain law and order. The appearance of Magyar Garda members and Roma Hungarian European Parliament Member Viktoria Mohacsi did little to diffuse the situation in a search for common understanding. End summary.

Evening Cocktails in Roma Homes

¶2. A small village of 1659 inhabitants (eight percent Roma), Patka lies 45 miles southwest of Budapest. Late in the evening of June 3, allegedly members of the local Civil Guards - not related to the Magyar Garda - threw Molotov cocktails into three Roma homes, causing minor damage but no injuries. The three Civil Guard members suspected of throwing the Molotov cocktails were detained by the Police a few days after the attack. Following the Civil Guards' arrest, the local council issued a statement signed by 500 residents, expressing support for the three until the investigation is complete.

¶3. During a visit by EmbOffs to Patka on June 19, Mayor Bela Furi commented that Roma and non-Roma residents used to live together in peace but now, four or five Roma individuals routinely break the law and harass the community residents. Furi stated that he and the local council are looking for ways to ensure citizens obey the law, noting that for almost 10 years the 39 member volunteer Civil Guard unit has operated in the village to help deter crime. (Note: the Civil Guard has no Roma members. End note.)

Yearning for the good old days...

¶4. Interspersed with council members' comments about Roma "horse-stealing, illegal apple picking, and limited trainability of Roma in only certain skill areas," the Doyen of the city council, Lajos Gyenei, expressed his opinion that the regime change generated most of the problems because Roma people are not obliged to have a job or permanent housing anymore. Continuing, Gyenei said that due to the poorly designed social welfare system, unemployed people who have many children and live solely on social benefits gain more than those who work for minimum wage. (Note: As septel will report, this is part of a growing chorus of complaints regarding the welfare system, and both the government and the opposition are talking about reforms to link receipt of benefits to performance of community work. End note.) This system encourages the so-called "crime for living" phenomena. Gyenei underscored that "the community has had enough of them stealing the fruits of the work of others." Mayor Furi and the Village Notary, Szilard Visi, both cited Roma players on the local soccer team as evidence that "there is no racism in the village." They both characterized the "unfortunate incident" as a police matter, blaming the media and politicians for crying racism.

¶5. Additionally, the Mayor said that the integration of the local

elementary school and unintended consequences has fueled public tension. When Roma students were integrated by law, the majority of non-Roma students left, enrolling in the nearby city of Szekesfehervar. With only a few remaining Roma children, the municipality could no longer finance the local school and it has been closed.

Local "crime," local "justice?"

¶16. Perhaps a catalyst for the recent attacks, in 2007 a young, drunk, Patka Roma man hit a non-Roma girl with his car. The girl suffered serious, lasting injuries. On June 2, 2008, one day before the Molotov cocktail attacks, the court found the driver guilty but suspended the sentence due to his mental instability. The Roma driver's house was one of those targeted with the Molotov cocktails.

"Outsiders'" interference

¶17. Responding to the attacks and the Civil Guard members' arrest, the "Together for Patka" Civil Group organized a village forum on June 13, inviting the Magyar Garda. Jozsef Furi, the Mayor's brother, and a "Together for Patka" member, praised their attendance, commenting that "the Magyar Garda is not against anyone, they simply stand at the side of honest people, showing them that they are not alone if they need protection." (Note: no Roma is a member of the "Together for Patka" Civil Group. End note.)

¶18. In response, European Parliamentary Member (MEP) Viktoria Mohacsi, a Roma, invited approximately 100 Roma men from other villages to be present. Separated from the 120 Magyar Garda members by police, shouting epithets was the extent of the confrontation. Ms. Mohacsi further stirred Patka's emotions when she raised the issue at the European Parliament in Strasbourg on June 16. Mayor Furi told EmbOffs he blamed Ms. Mohacsi for interfering in a local affair, "spreading her lies in the media and in the European Parliament, only aggravating the situation." He noted that she did not even visit him while in Patka on June 13.

The rest of the story?

¶19. EmbOffs also met with Istvan Lakatos, one of the Roma victims of the Molotov cocktail attack and a former member of the local city council. Lakatos said that the attack was unprovoked and that he has serious concerns about the future relations between the Roma and non-Roma citizens in Patka. He noted that the Mayor did not even come to visit the occupants of the three homes after the attacks. Lakatos also praised Ms. Mohacsi's demonstration of solidarity with the local Roma people, commenting that "only her involvement saved the lives of Roma residents."

¶110. Ms. Mohacsi told EmbOffs on June 20, that "racism is behind the Molotov cocktail incident -- what else could it be?" When asked by PolOff if her invitation to Roma men from other towns may have exacerbated the situation, Mohacsi acknowledged that she "was not thinking when one of my colleagues offered to bring a couple of strong Roma men from the neighboring cities to a rally where Magyar Garda is invited [but], I believe Magyar Garda is a threat to Roma people who have no confidence in police defending them."

¶111. Interestingly, the Mayor, Istvan Lakatos and Viktoria Mohacsi all mentioned an American investor's plan to build a wellness resort in Patka. Lakatos and Mohacsi both mentioned this investment as playing a role in trying to "drive" the Roma out of the village because "the investment will only happen if no Roma live in the town anymore."

Co-existence - on whose terms?

¶112. During the visit to Patka, the city council members provided EmbOffs a draft copy of the "Moral Agreement of Co-existence" that they plan to distribute to all the residents. If the majority signs the agreement outlining "correct" social behavior and rules, the agreement will take effect. Guidelines include appropriate

greetings to each other based on age and gender, respect for public institutions, public buildings, public officials, church leaders, and public and private property. Queried as to the "punishment" if someone breaks a rule, the council members stated they have yet to decide. The Mayor postponed a planned June 25 meeting to discuss the agreement and other issues with the local Roma community pending the Roma's approval of their representatives.

¶13. Comment. The Patka Molotov cocktail incident raises the ante of anti-Roma activity in Hungary. The presence of the Magyar Garda continues the trend of their appearance in smaller towns and villages - where observers tell us they are strongest - and where Magyar Garda leaders say Roma criminality is a huge problem. The Patka attack, coupled with Magyar Garda "appearances" in two other villages during the same week, considerably lowers the flash point for physical confrontation between the Magyar Garda and Roma counter-protestors. We will continue to monitor events carefully over the summer and restate our tolerance message at every opportunity.

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